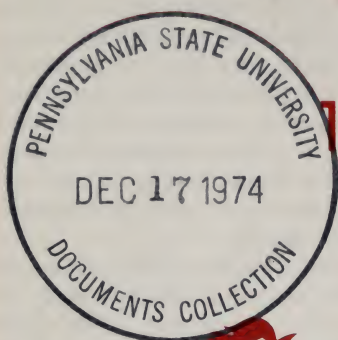


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Agriculture USA



1840
to
1974



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Social and Economic Statistics Administration
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

THE FIRST CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

The first census of agriculture in the United States was taken in 1840, the year of the Sixth Decennial Census of Population. Martin Van Buren was President. There were 26 States, the District of Columbia, and three Territories to cover.

Results of the census showed a population of 17 million with 15 million living in rural areas. The crop harvest totaled 378 million bushels of Indian corn, 123 million bushels of oats, 108 million bushels of potatoes, 85 million bushels of wheat, 791 million pounds of cotton, 219 million pounds of tobacco; and there were 155 million pounds of sugar and 36 million pounds of wool produced.

No serious endeavor was made to categorize the data in an orderly manner, let alone analyze it. Missing from the 1840 census was a count of the Nation's farms; they had handled the problem of farm definition by ignoring it.

Legal provisions for the 1840 census were identical to those which had been in force since the first population census in 1790: Federal marshals were required to appoint one or more assistants in each city and county and to divide their territories or districts into appropriate divisions, and these divisions could not comprise more than one county but could consist of one or more townships, wards, or precincts, plainly and distinctly bounded.

The census of 1840 was directed by the Secretary of State. Later, the responsibility shifted to the Secretary of Interior, then to the Commissioner of Labor, and in 1902 to a permanently established Director of the Census.

Following 1840, and until 1950, the census of agriculture was taken every 10 years as part of the decennial census of population. Beginning in 1925 additional farm censuses were conducted at the mid-decade to provide at more frequent intervals the benchmark data needed to firm up the annual estimates of the Department of Agriculture. After 1950, Congress approved the proposal to improve enumeration of the census of agriculture by

starting collection of the data in the fall of the year to which the census referred before really bad weather set in and before tenants had changed farms for the next year. Thus, since then we have had the census of agriculture in the years ending in "4" and "9."

EARLY PROBLEMS

The 1840 census set in motion a strong argument for setting up a permanent bureau of statistics. A congressional committee was established to investigate ways to purge census data of errors and to work toward improvement and refinement. It was hoped that future censuses would not be faulted by revelations of poor judgment or miscalculation.

For the most part, shortcomings in the census of 1840 were due to the ineffectiveness of the machinery by which the census was taken. They arose, too, because enumerators were inadequately paid for increases in the number of inquiries, and because the marshals—who had other duties to perform—were not able to provide proper supervision. Furthermore, the effort to gather industrial and commercial statistics met with antagonism in some sections of the country because it was widely believed that census results would be used to increase taxes.

THE SCOPE OF THE CENSUS WIDENS

In the census of 1850, data about farming were developed by requesting for each farm the name of the owner, agent, or manager; the number of acres of improved and unimproved land; the worth of the farm; and the value of farming implements and machinery.

In 1840 questions concerning agriculture were aimed at determining production of rye, buckwheat, potatoes, Indian corn, wheat, barley, and oats; of wool, hops, wax, tobacco, rice, cotton, silk cocoons, and sugar; of hay, hemp, and flax;

and cords of wood sold. They were also designed to measure the value of dairy products, poultry, and output from orchards; the number of horses, mules, neat (domesticated) cattle, sheep, and swine; and, finally, the value of homemade or family-manufactured crafts.

But, in 1850 questions were asked also as to value as well as number of livestock such as horses, asses, mules, milch cows, working oxen, sheep, and swine. Determinations were made as to the quantity produced during the year of each of the following 32 crops or farm products: Wheat, rye, Indian corn, oats, barley, buckwheat, rice, tobacco, ginned cotton, wool, peas, beans, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, wine, butter, cheese, hay, clover, seed, other grass seeds, hops, dew-rotted hemp, water-rotted hemp, flax, flaxseed, silk cocoons, maple sugar, cane sugar, molasses, beeswax, and honey. Similar accountings were made for the value of orchard products, the value of the produce of market gardens, the value of homemade manufactures, and the value of slaughtered animals.

The average size farm in 1850 was just over 200 acres. However, the Homestead Act and the breaking up of southern plantations during the 1860's resulted in a decline in average farm size. It was not until a century later, 1950, that the average size again was in excess of 200 acres.

The 1850 census was a marked improvement over 1840 while the 1860 census featured new additions and extensions, provided a much clearer and modified set of instructions, and lessened confusion as to the intent of the inquiries. This census was praised by members of Congress and the statistical community as the most complete produced by any nation at that time.

The 1870 census of agriculture reported 2.7 million farms in the United States. After reaching a high of 6.8 million in 1935, the number dropped to 2.7 by 1969, the same as a century before.

Between 1880 and 1900, few changes were made in the legal strictures, the nature of the schedules, or the administration of the processing.

However, there was an increase in the number of items of information requested. In 1880 the census of agriculture asked 108 questions, and in 1890 the number climbed to 255.

FARMING OUTPACED POPULATION

By 1900 the census of agriculture had documented sweeping changes in the Nation's social and economic structure and held out every hope for prodigious advancement in the future. Farm census figures showed that production increases of principal agricultural commodities had more than kept pace with the increase in population. For example, between 1840 and 1870 the production of wheat, corn, and cotton quintupled.

Census measures of production showed that no other country could match the United States in the production of wool. Only Australia and Argentina offered significant competition.

Farm statistics noted breakthroughs in the techniques of irrigation and drainage, they cited progress in the invention and manufacture of threshing instruments, and they pointed out the introduction of new domestic animals such as camels and cashmere goats.

Census tabulations between 1850 and 1900 showed that tobacco yields more than doubled and, in the same period, American wine production increased sevenfold.

Figures showed that the exportation of American cheese and Indian corn was worldwide. Europe—especially England—became dependent on American grains, and millions of bushels were exported.

Farm censuses described the mitigation of livestock diseases and spurred investigation of the problems of destructive insects. Also, these censuses spread knowledge about weather conditions, enabling the farmer to avoid injurious losses and soberly plan for growth which maximized output.

Agricultural censuses revealed the forming of farm associations. In addition, they called

attention to the appearance of excellent agricultural and horticultural periodicals and indicated the founding of agricultural schools and colleges.

All in all, the censuses of agriculture undertaken in the 19th century reminded the Nation of where it had been and what it had so magnificently achieved, and they signaled a future which challenged the Nation's capacity for fulfilling its vast potential.

FARMING MEASURED EVERY 5 YEARS

Agriculture in the United States during the first two decades of the 20th century had become so productive and so fast-changing that it became necessary to conduct censuses on a 5-year basis to keep pace with growth.

Stimulated by a census finding in 1920 that only 7 percent of the Nation's farms had electricity, the Federal Government began an active program to bring dependable power to farming communities. By 1954, census data showed that 93 percent of U.S. farms had electricity.

During World War I, and again during World War II, the drive for swift expansion of agricultural production and the need to conserve manpower resulted in wide use of census statistics. After each war, the readjustment to new levels of demand required intensive analysis of the information generated in the censuses of agriculture.

Farm census statistics in 1935 showed the total of farmers in each county without convenient access to all-weather roads, stimulating efforts to improve farm-to-market thoroughfares. Moreover, later censuses gave a periodic measure of the progress that was made.

After 1940, U.S. agriculture burgeoned. By 1960 one-third fewer farmers than in 1940 were producing 50-percent more farm output. At the turn of the century, one farmer supplied food and fiber for only 7 people; by 1969 one farmer supplied 45 persons.

When the first census of agriculture was taken in 1840, most Americans lived on farms and

earned their income from farming. By 1969, 4.9 percent of the U.S. population living on 2.7 million farms and ranches produced sufficient farm products not only for this country but also for numerous international neighbors as well.

New and improved farming technologies adopted between 1940 and 1970 resulted in increases in U.S. farm production unparalleled in the experiences of other nations. Census data reported that capital requirements for farming proliferated sevenfold from 1940 to 1960. The value of assets per farmworker today exceeds \$24,000, a sum greater than the assets per industrial worker.

Until 1890, results of the census of agriculture were tabulated by conventional clerical and editing procedures. The introduction of punchcards in 1890 made tabulations six times faster than were possible by hand. In 1940, mechanical editing was a major innovation. From 1964 forward, farm censuses have been tabulated by electronic computers.

PLANNING THE CENSUS

Careful planning is the hallmark of an agricultural census. Advice is sought from leading farm organizations and authorities before census inquiries are submitted to Congress for final approval. Included among those groups providing assistance for the proposed 1974 census are the following:

- American Farm Bureau Federation
- National Farmers Organization
- National Farmers Union
- National Grange
- American Petroleum Institute
- Agricultural Publishers Association
- American Farm Economic Association
- National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
- Farm Equipment Institute
- Rural Sociological Society
- State Departments of Agriculture
- Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges
- American Farm Bureau Women's Committee
- American Agricultural Economic Association

Federal Statistics Users' Conference
National Agri-Marketing Association
National Agricultural Chemicals Association
American Meat Institute
American Feed Manufacturers Association
National Cannery Association

Recommendations emerging from these organizations—as well as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the staff of the Agriculture Division of the Census Bureau, and, perhaps most importantly, the census users—contribute significantly to the character and tone of the census.

WHY TAKE A CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculturalists say that censuses are vital because it is necessary to take an inventory of where the Nation stands and where it seems to be going. The 5-year census is a nationwide measure of the national farming enterprise. Over the years it has demonstrated that the United States is a nation of plenty, that farms ultimately provide about one-third of the Nation's jobs, and that farming is done in nearly every county. It has provided measures of the millions of farms spread over five climatic belts with 500 types of farming areas and nearly 5,000 varieties of soil.

WHO BENEFITS FROM THE CENSUS

Many individuals and groups benefit from farm census data:

Farmers who need to understand the complexities and trends of the business of which they are a part

Manufacturers and merchants who annually sell over \$30 billion worth of farming equipment and supplies

Farm organizations which speak for farmers on political and economic matters

Processors and dealers who buy more than \$40 billion worth of farm products each year

Agricultural colleges which must tailor their curriculums and their research to the needs of farms and ranches

Agencies within the U.S. Department of Agriculture which furnish agricultural counsel and advice

Public officials who forge policy and administrate programs

CENSUS BY MAIL

Work on the most recent (1969) census of agriculture spanned 5 years. It covered nearly 3 million farms, was performed by mail for the first time, and cost over \$25 million. Questions asked sought the following information:

Inventories of agricultural land

The amount and kind of products produced and sold

A count of livestock and poultry

Amounts of farm income and important cash expenditures

In 1974, as in 1969, the farm census will be by mail and self-enumeration. Questionnaires will be mailed out the last of December 1974 and are to be filled out and mailed back as soon as possible. A detailed report form will be sent to farms with annual sales of \$2,500 or more, while a short form will be dispatched to farms with sales below \$2,500.

Census by mail allows farmers to complete reports at their convenience and to make use of farm business records. In the absence of records, best estimates are acceptable. As in the past, all information collected will be kept strictly con-

fidential; no fact will be revealed about any individual or farm.

Specialized agriculture will be covered in questions dealing with hydroponic farming, nursery products, fish, honey, horses and ponies, mink and mink pelts, and fruits and vegetables of all kinds. New questions will be concerned with grain storage facilities and the use of the commodity futures market.

In reporting results, farms with sales of \$2,500 or more will be described in detail. The following information will be included among the tabular summaries:

Acres of individual crops harvested

Acres irrigated

Acres fertilized

Number of tractors by type

Number of regular hired workers

Tons of dry and liquid fertilizer used

Acres limed

Acres on which chemicals were applied

Inventory of cattle

Hogs and sheep by age-sex classes

Total of contracts for production of crops and livestock items

In 1969 the census of agriculture counted 1,733,683 farms with sales of \$2,500 or more and showed that they accounted for 98 percent of the total value of all farm products sold.

The 1974 census will incorporate contemporary advances in automation, an increased responsiveness to users who have made their wishes known, and the cumulative experience gained in earlier censuses. It can be expected to improve on the 1969 census, provide data never gathered before, and offer timeliness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness that will set a new precedent in the history of agricultural census taking.

Fill it out —
Mail it back



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